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What's Interesting? On the Ascendency of an Evaluative Term

Mark Dorrian

Our conversations with students when we teach architectural design – whether they take place in tutorials or other kinds of review – have become saturated with the word "interesting". It has, it seems to me, more than any other, become the key term that we use to respond to and evaluate design work. Indeed sometimes it can seem that that it is the *only* thing we have to say – maybe even the only thing that is left for us to say. As an evaluative category, it has an uncanny ability to absorb and supersede other terms, its seeming indeterminacy allowing it to encompass a broad range of possible meanings, which in turn makes a lot hinge on how the word is enunciated. A long and drawn-out "mmm in-ter-est-ing" is very different to a forceful "that's *interesting!*" And of course this ubiquity and malleability spreads beyond architectural design discourses. One colleague from another subject area in the institution at which I teach has told me that his tutor had three ways of responding to work – if he didn't like it, he called it "interesting"; if he thought it good, it was "very interesting"; and if it was even better, it was "really very interesting". "Once I noticed this", my friend continued, "he was lost to me as a teacher."

Something I think to be symptomatic of the situation is the difficulty that we find of doing without the term – and I know, for there have been times when I have tried. But interestingly nothing else seems to do quite the same job as effectively and in the same way. And yet even as we are so clearly invested in and heavily committed to it, we seem to harbour anxieties – concerns about a hollowness or emptiness in this judgement that seems a way of avoiding making a judgement, a way of saying something that in fact says nothing. Certainly I have found that it has been enough to mention to colleagues that I am doing some work on this for them to voluntarily and without compulsion try to give up its use, as if it was a kind of collectively-shared dirty secret, something that we really always knew was in some way wrong, but have indulged until it is pointed out to us. However, we are not alone. Although I am concerned directly here with architectural design teaching and the way we talk about design work, what is very striking is the extent to which the term is everywhere. As Sianne Ngai, whose important book *Our Aesthetic Categories* I will refer to throughout this paper, notes: interesting is "an evaluation that continues to circulate promiscuously – if often, in a telling way, surreptitiously – in virtually all contemporary writing on cultural artifacts."ⁱ One of the principal things we want scholarship to do is to make its objects of study "interesting" – that is, to make them more vivid for us; if we are writing a statement of support for a doctoral student, perhaps the strongest thing we can say is that she has an ability to formulate and pursue interesting research questions; and we are pleased when people say things to us like "your work is always so interesting". In contexts like these, "good" seems too inert, and

"brilliant" too polished, or thin, or brittle. But with "interesting", then there is something to talk about – and that is a point to which we will shortly return.

Reportedly, the renowned modernist master Mies van der Rohe used to say "I'd rather be good than interesting."ⁱⁱ The phrasing implies that – for Mies – it was possible to be one or the other, but probably not both at the same time. To be good presumably meant to produce works of universally recognisable and enduring value, as opposed to ones that were mere curiosities, distractions that might detain us for a while but were soon to be passed over for something else.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the timelessness and universality of the aphorism were themselves destined to run into trouble – and so, to take one example, we find Charles Jencks in the mid-1990s, during a discussion of what he called the "hetero-architecture" of Los Angeles architects (Frank Gehry, Morphosis, Eric Owen Moss, etc.), suggesting that the inversion of the Miesian proposition (i.e. "I'd rather be interesting than good") was "almost the dictum of the L.A. School of architects with its love of the botched but fascinating joint."^{iv} Here Jencks ironically played "interesting" LA hetero-architecture – which he saw as reflecting the multicultural dynamism of the city – off against the boring WASP-ish uptightness of the monotonous Miesian downtown. As he put it: "Mies for the classes and hetero-architecture for the masses."^v It was notable in Jencks' argument that, while the terms had been switched around thereby reversing their priority, the structuring opposition itself remained very much intact (with the characteristic Miesian locus of the detail being the point of discrimination – namely "the botched but fascinating joint").

Now, against this background, what I find to be very striking today, certainly in the kind of teaching studio environments with which I am familiar, is the way in which the opposition itself seems to have been dissolved and we have arrived at a situation in which one of the terms has been completely absorbed the other – now it is good to be interesting, indeed better than to be only "good" (which is no longer what it used to be). At the same time, this has been accompanied by a kind of rhetorical ratcheting-up of the term and a new intensity of relation with it. Theorizations of "interesting" as an evaluative category have tended to stress *minima* – coolness, low levels of affect, interesting as the minimal condition of approval. But today what has been described as the "merely interesting" (the silent "merely" that by implication prefixed the word), seems to be frequently transformed into an enthusiastically enunciated "really interesting". In accord with this, the most disappointing experience a student can now have when they present their design work is not to raise the interest of the critics. In a real way this seems worse than being told one's project is "bad" – because if bad it has touched on something of significance, produced a degree of affect, and perhaps even issued some kind of challenge to prevailing norms (and I think this holds a specific clue for us in thinking about what we mean when we strongly affirm design work as "interesting"). Certainly there is a notable tradition of celebrated architects recounting how they were misjudged by their teachers and, at least retrospectively, taking the very terms of their critique as an affirmation.^{vi}

To provoke a strong response *is* something, potentially something important. But to provoke lack of interest – well, that is not even a provocation.

What I aim to do then in this paper is to explore the rise of "interesting" as an evaluative term in contemporary studio pedagogy, for I think it testifies to important recent shifts in architectural education regarding what we think it should be, and what we feel are its roles and responsibilities. At the same time this seems to me to relate to a reconfiguration of our sense of what it is to teach architectural design, and even a latent worry about the degree to which that term – "teaching" – is even tenable, given its teleological and instrumentally didactic overtones. (One thing that we might argue here is that we start to specifically value projects as "interesting" whenever our normative understanding of what teaching is begins to become unstable). Certainly, from one point of view, "interesting" might be dismissed as a kind of diplomatic euphemism, a woolly way of talking round the issues – and no doubt this is a danger, but surely we can find more productive ways of thinking about it than that. In this spirit, the questions I therefore want to ask concern what sort of thing we are doing, or might be doing, when we use the term; what does it reflect and what are its consequences; and why, today, might we have a new degree of attachment to it – all of which come together to form the overarching question, "What's interesting about 'interesting'?"

In a moment I will frame some arguments on this, but first we will need to channel the discussion through the very particular history of the term as an aesthetic category, and here I will be drawing heavily on the work of Sianne Ngai. In her account, she traces the emergence of "interesting", "... as both judgment and style" as she puts it, to German romantic literary criticism of the late eighteenth century, and in particular to Friedrich Schlegel's reflections on modern literary form, which he specifically defined as "interesting" as distinct from the "beautiful" art of ancient Greece.^{vii} While the art of the ancients was characterised by universality, necessity and finality, that of the moderns – who are epochally closed-off from their predecessors – inevitably takes the form, according to Schlegel, of an endless striving, a serial process of "particularization" that can never be concluded. As it is cut off from any final, satisfying determination, Schlegel comes to describe the "interesting" in terms of quantitative intensities. After the possibility of the absolute, there can only be a process of intensification, each stage of which, because non-absolute, is logically capable of being surpassed. "Every original individual", Schlegel wrote, "that contains a particular quantity of intellectual content or aesthetic energy is *interesting* ... there can be no *endpoint* ...".^{viii} "Even that which is most interesting could be more interesting ...".^{ix} We clearly have a view here of the kind of conceptual framework that underlies the Miesian opposition between the "good" and the "interesting". But at the same time, we see the nascent articulation of what we might describe as a post-theological aesthetic – that is, a "nonbeautiful" aesthetic that arises after the possibility of transcendence, or after it is renounced.

Importantly, as Schlegel's theory of romantic literature developed and became focused on the form of the novel, his thinking on the "interesting" became linked to a movement whereby the conceptual reflection on the work of art is absorbed into it. As Ngai writes: "For Schlegel, 'interessante' also seems to mark a convergence of art with conceptual discourse about art, or an internalization by art – which conceptually becomes philosophical or 'reflective' – of the 'relation between theory and praxis'".^x This tendency is exemplified in Schlegel's call for a theory of the novel that would itself take the form of the novel – a condition that he recognised in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. If beauty is bound by external rules, then – in the modern era of the "interesting" – the rules themselves emerge as a problem that has to be internalised within the artwork.

Now all this may seem rather distant from the day-to-day manner in which we talk about design with architecture students, but I think it casts light on the way that we use certain evaluative terms – and even the kinds of "feeling" that we have, and that we share, when we do. It also shows the way in which our predilection for "interesting" shades from a style of criticism into something that looks like an ethics of criticism. Let's return to the Miesian opposition between "good" and "interesting". When I use the term "good", I feel that I am making a conclusive judgement – one that implies closure, completion, and finality. I express my admiration, and position myself as external to the work. "Good" is in a certain way always a last word – and that is its point. On the other hand, to call work "interesting" is immediately to understand it as something permeable. "Interesting" is inevitably in the position of a first word – it is future-orientated and leading, and more than that, tends to the participatory and mutual. When we say work is "interesting", with all the burden of subsequent articulation that that entails, we are less critics standing *outside* it, than co-producers *of* it. In a significant way, "interesting" therefore locates us alongside the student, and involved in a complex process of socialisation of which the emergent work itself is part. Here the work is "interesting" in its full etymological sense: *inter esse*, that is, "being between" or "in the midst of" or "in the interval". We are close here to the distinction Bruno Latour has made between what he calls "matters of fact" and "matters of concern".^{xi} If the term "interesting" marks a matter of concern, something around which attachments and discourse develop, the decidedness and terminal judgement of the good tends to locate it as a "matter of fact".

All this is to say that when we describe a work as "interesting", we produce a kind of re-routing of critical authority. We seem to make a knowledge-based claim, while simultaneously placing it in abeyance. This condition of present inarticulacy, accompanied as it is by the sense that there is much to say, that there *will be* much to say, displaces the critic's dominance over the work, and may even register a kind of epistemological – and pedagogical – modesty, a doubt about the very possibility of final words and a recognition of the limits and partial nature of any claims that we might make. It seems to me that one of the key pieces of architectural criticism that evidently works in this mode is Robin Evans'

celebrated review of Daniel Libeskind's *Chamberworks* drawings, which were exhibited at the Architectural Association in London in October 1983. Titled "In Front of Lines that Leave Nothing Behind", Evans' text deftly navigates the sorts of questions posed by Libeskind's drawings (questions about in what way we should see them; about assumptions of frontality; about the hermeneutics of depth; etc.) In one way, Evans turns out to have rather a lot to say about the drawings – he describes them closely, recognises that they emanate from architectural technique, that they are made with specific drawing instruments, and so on. But at the same time, he holds open the question of what these things actually are, these drawings that occupy a kind of enigmatic zone by offering a particular disciplinary (or cognitive or institutional) challenge – that is, by being *of* architecture but not architecture, at least in any straightforward way. This, it seems to me, is a virtually emblematic example of architectural criticism in its "really interesting" mode – evidencing strong affect and attachment (Evans leaves us in no doubt that he is compelled, gripped by what he sees); an implicit challenge to the normative conventions that undergird a practice (more on this soon); and a resultant interpretative hesitancy, a sense of something unsayable or, at least, not yet able to be said. As Ngai at one point comments: "... interest begins as a feeling of not knowing exactly what we are feeling"^{xii}, and as Evans' review finishes "Marvellous. More to be said. Not now."^{xiii}

In his article Evans insists on the opacity of the *Chamberworks* drawings, which he describes as "Another kind of opacity. No one to talk about. No transactions to record. No past to reconstruct."^{xiv} This opacity is referred to in opposition to what he calls "frontal interpretation"^{xv}, by which he means an approach to the work that tries to read it in terms of depth conditions. And this, in turn, leads him to imagine a form of criticism as interpretation that displays – as he puts it – "... an entirely different orientation, reading potency not latency. It would become as uncertain an enterprise as any kind of search not assured of at least the possibility of verification".^{xvi} If the judgement of the good implies (and requires) a condition of transparency, the "interesting" – which is inevitably tied to deferral, a not yet (or Evans' "not now") – seems to turn on some kind of condition of opacity. In this sense, to call something "interesting" is always a way of saying that there is more to be said, a way of maintaining discourse, and keeping it circulating in relation to its objects. The terms of Evans' discussion are remarkably close to the idea of the *enigma*, as formulated by the philosopher Mario Perniola, who writes that the "... enigma draws its strength from the questioning tension that it arouses. Unlike the secret, which is dissolved in the process of being communicated, enigma is capable of simultaneous explanation on many different registers of meaning, all of which are equally valid, and it is thus able to open up an intermediate space that is not necessarily bound to be filled."^{xvii} He consequently characterises the "nature of enigma" as "transit, an imperceptible inching toward something that is different".^{xviii} And here we seem brought again close to Schlegel, for whom – Jan Mieszkowski writes – the "interesting" is "an

experience with the possibility of difference ... with what is different, with what makes a difference, and with what could make oneself or a given state of affairs different".^{xix}

Related to the enigma, the "interesting" seems often connected to situations in which there is some kind of flaw or problem – some condition in which the picture does not appear to fit properly together. Again, it differentiates itself from the good or beautiful, which are constituted by the absence of any such flaw. Here the problem itself becomes the point of attachment onto which interest fastens, an attachment that can have a powerful libidinal investment. A classic example of this is, I suppose, Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo*, in which James Stewart's retired detective is hired by an old friend to track his wife, the enigmatic Madeleine, who is apparently possessed by the spirit of her great-grandmother, Carlotta Valdes. Here this compellingly interesting woman is figured as a problem, a mystery whose play of identities seems to vertiginously dissolve the existential ground of the life/death binary itself, symbolised in the famous dream sequence in which the James Stewart character falls into the abyss of Carlotta's opened grave.^{xx} The larger point here is that things that "don't fit" (flaws, dissonances, anamorphoses, gaps of one kind or another) are interesting because they make visible, and hence problematise, the commitments that underlie normative constructions, conventional practices, "realities" to which we are habituated, etc., all commitments that the "good" tends to hide by silently affirming and conforming to them. This is why, as I have hinted earlier, what is judged to be bad work can still be interesting – and why indeed there is a long tradition of talking about such work in this way (Ngai notes that "In Schlegel's 1800 manifesto 'Dialogue on Poetry' and other writings published in the *Athenaeum*, 'interesting' also seems to refer to how a work can still be somewhat 'good' even when it is largely 'bad'....").^{xxi} Work might be poorly constructed, ill-judged, clumsily executed – but it can do all this in an *interesting* way, by posing questions back to the limitations of the criteria that it has failed to satisfy.

I think this is why, in architectural design teaching studios, the kind of work we strongly affirm as "really interesting" often seems to involve some kind of swerve or parallax condition, for these give rise to this metacritical effect. Such projects seem to aim at a slightly different place than the brief (the document that describes the task to be undertaken) itself does. However, because of the significance of the questions they raise (about the assumptions or limitations inherent in the way the teaching project is framed, etc.), they have the effect of making us wonder whether this was really, after all, the place at which the brief we wrote was aiming. If, as I suggested earlier, the discourse of the "interesting" positions the tutor as a co-producer of the work, we see here – from the other side – how "interesting" projects position the student as a co-producer of the brief.

Famously, the writer Henry James identified the "interesting" as the criterion of value of the novel, and this has been interpreted in relation to the way the it dramatises the tension

between the particular and the general (that is individual character, as conveyed through first person narrative, in relation to the overarching structures [of bourgeois convention etc.] within which the life stories of the protagonists are entangled).^{xxii} Here "interest" is understood to arise out of the friction between the two, and it is not hard to see a relation with architectural design. For – it seems to me at least – we are constantly encouraging our students to strive for something like this and rewarding, as the best work, projects that do. In short, we seek projects that dramatise this relation between the particular and the general, where by "dramatise" I mean, make legible or visible in a heightened way. This is to say, we want students to develop and critically position the particularity of their individual project in relation to the broader generalities within which they, as producers, are situated (formations such as professional discourses, technical modalities, the institutional context of the academy, the political relations that structure production, etc.) Here, by "critically position", I mean *knowingly* position, in such a way that their work productively grates against these broader conditions, making them newly palpable, but also putting pressure upon them, in which case, recalling Mario Perniola on the enigma, the projects could be characterised as *transitive* – "an inching toward something that is different".^{xxiii} Such projects that reflect upon their own conditions of possibility, that are critically self-aware, and that fold that critical-historical self-awareness into themselves, look rather similar to Schlegel's notion – which we recall was identified with the "interesting" – of a theory of the novel that itself would take the form of a novel. One of the main reasons that we use "interesting" all the time, is that "really interesting" projects in this precise sense are, in the end, what we ask for in the briefs we write and what we have come to see as the most sophisticated (that is, reflexive, self-aware, fully-achieved) work. And perhaps that is also the reasons why our evaluations, like my colleague's tutor whom I mentioned at the start, so often seem to take place on a scale of degrees of intensity of interest: "interesting" "very interesting" "really very interesting".

It seems to me that this also throws light on the great emphasis on *process* in contemporary architectural studio pedagogies. In her discussion of the "interesting" in modern art, Ngai focuses on conceptual art and particularly on the serial artwork, as an aesthetic of minor differentiation that takes place within a larger horizon of technological standardisation. Now, the architectural design process is inevitably serial – students work through chains of representations, structured through relations of difference that we describe as design development. But at the same time we are aware that this is not a straightforward case of accumulation and instead understand that things are abandoned, or are not taken up, or go unrecognised in the process – which is to say that at each stage in the design process, in each representation made, there exist complex potentialities that point in different directions and suggest alternative futures for the project than the one that will eventually be arrived at. Thus when we exhort students to curate and display their design process – as we now almost always do – we relativise the final submission of the project by placing it within a series of

(potential) other projects to which it belongs. We register the finality of the endpoint as provisional, marking it as just one position within a series that could extend or even be differently configured (it is not uncommon for individual reviewers, or even entire assessment boards, to "prefer" an earlier iteration of the work). Moreover, we expect the display of process to be the vehicle through which the internalisation of critical reflection within the work itself is displayed and made intelligible. And of course both of these – the loss of finality, and the self-reflection of the work within itself – return us directly to the aesthetics of the "interesting" as theorised by Schlegel.

If "really interesting" work is – as I have suggested – work that addresses from the inside, as it were, the metaconditions within which architecture is pursued, then it seems probable that there is a relation between rise of the term in pedagogic discourse and architecture's contemporary disciplinary anxieties – anxieties to do with loss of agency, cultural displacement, marginalisation, institutional changes (large-scale disappearance of architects from the public sector), and so on. Yet, while on one hand these suggest a diminishing of the operational contexts within which architecture takes place, on the other we have an expanding appreciation in the academy of the complex ecologies, human and nonhuman, in which architectural production occurs, to the extent that it becomes difficult to know where our concerns with design might stop or what might not be relevant – or indeed even what we might exactly mean by relevance. One of the ways I think that this has worked out is in the return of the megaproject in the academy just at the point at which the institutional conditions under which projects of this type might be realised seem to have evaporated, at least in the West. As I write this, vast, mega-scale projects are underway everywhere in schools of architecture, often focused around infrastructure and frequently also based on international-aid-like scenarios (postcatastrophic contexts, etc.) There is not space here to develop this idea in detail, and I do not have any particular criticism to make of these for I do see the issues they address as important and necessary things to think about. Here I only want to suggest that they are a symptom of a desire to claim an expanded agency and intensified relevance for architecture at a point when it seems most weak and perhaps least relevant. And, of course, in doing this, in striving to conceptualise this expanded agency – which might, and often does, look very different from what we take to be conventional models of architectural practice, perhaps to the point where we are not even sure if this is the right way to describe it at all – the projects are involved in a metacritique that aligns them with the "interesting".

The intention here has not been to disabuse us of the presence of the word in studio pedagogy, but rather to sharpen our understanding of, and sensitivity to, the conditions under which it is used – and that involves situating it in relation to broader cultural patterns and transformations, one of which is the atrophication of universal guarantors of value (to which, indeed, the ascendancy of "interesting" as an evaluative term testifies). No doubt there are

various ways that the word "interesting" can be lazily or mis-used when talking about design projects, but it seems to me that the most problematic case is when things are left simply at that, and nothing more is said. On the other hand, used well, "interesting" registers a genuine sense of surprise together with the intimation that there is something of importance at stake here, something that can make a difference that counts – and this in turn opens onto a vivifying and mutual endeavour of thinking and articulation that takes place around a matter of shared concern. And this what is really, and not just merely, interesting.

ⁱ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 110.

ⁱⁱ When Mies was interviewed for the phonograph record *Conversations Regarding the Future of Architecture*, produced by the Reynolds Metal Company and issued in 1956, he – and indeed the entire recording – concluded with the words "I don't want to be interesting. I want to be good." (See <http://www.miessociety.org/speeches/conversations-regarding-future-architecture/> The recording itself is online at <https://soundcloud.com/mattgoad/conversations-regarding-the> [both accessed 22 February 2006]). Four years later this was quoted in the section on Mies in Peter Blake's *The Master Builders*: "But novelty for its own sake? That, to Mies, disqualifies a man from being an architect. 'I don't want to be interesting,' Mies told an interviewer, 'I want to be good!'" (Peter Blake, *The Master Builders* [London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1960], 201). The words are reported by Charles Jencks on a number of occasions in the more aphoristic form given here – for example, "The Modernist approach ... is to opt for a Minimalist style which, virtually ignoring the demands of stylistic pluralism and public symbolism, celebrates the hard facts of technology and organisation; thus Mies' oft-quoted aphorism – 'I'd rather be good than interesting'." (Charles Jencks, *Post-modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture* [London: Academy Editions, 1987], 228). Notably, in some renderings, "original" replaces "interesting" – thus, "... we must remember Mies van der Rohe who said 'I'd rather be good than original'..." (Robert Venturi, "Frank Lloyd Wright Essay for the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts" [1991], in *Iconography and Electronics – Upon a Generic Architecture: A View from the Drafting Room* [Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1996], 67–72, 68).

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. "Mies's indebtedness to Kant is ... obvious in his striving for universality ... It was this attitude of developing forms out of a material's nature and of purifying them to a point where they achieved universal applicability, which Mies understood as being good rather than interesting." Ludwig Glaeser, *Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe: Furniture and Furniture Drawings from the Design Collection and The Mies Van Der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: MOMA, 1977), 17.

^{iv} Charles Jencks, "Hetero-Architecture and the L.A. School", in Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (eds.), *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996), 47–75, 52.

^v Jencks, "Hetero-Architecture and the L.A. School", 51.

^{vi} Such as, for example, Aldo Rossi, who wrote: "I believe I was one of the worst students at the Politecnico in Milan, although I now think that the critical comments addressed to me are among the best compliments I ever received. Professor Sabbioni, whom I admired especially, discouraged me from pursuing a career in architecture: he said my drawings looked like those of a mason or rural builder who might toss a stone to indicate an approximate location for a window. The comment drew laughter from my friends but it filled me with joy; today I try to recover that felicity of drawing which was taken for inexperience and stupidity, and which has subsequently characterized my work." Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford, eds., *Aldo Rossi: Buildings and Projects* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 18.

^{vii} Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 112, 121.

^{viii} Friedrich Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 35; cited in Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 121.

^{ix} Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, 72; cited in Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 122.

^x Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 124.

^{xi} Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004), 225–248.

^{xii} Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 135.

^{xiii} Robin Evans, "In Front of Lines That Leave Nothing Behind", *AA Files* 6 (May, 1984), 89–96, 96.

^{xiv} Evans, "In Front of Lines That Leave Nothing Behind", 90.

^{xv} Evans, "In Front of Lines That Leave Nothing Behind", 93.

^{xvi} Evans, "In Front of Lines That Leave Nothing Behind", 93.

^{xvii} Mario Perniola, *Enigmas: The Egyptian Moment in Society and Art* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 10.

^{xviii} Perniola, *Enigmas*, 12

^{xix} Jan Mieszkowski, *Labors of Imagination: Aesthetics and Political Economy from Kant to Althusser* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 114; cited in Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 26.

^{xx} I discuss this at more length in my book *Writing on the Image: Architecture, the City and the Politics of Representation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 102–103.

^{xxi} Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 126.

^{xxii} "The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. That general responsibility rests upon it ..." Henry James, "The Art of Fiction", in *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 186–206, 191. .

^{xxiii} This affective and critical relationship of the project with its own conditions of possibility is the reason why works that exist purely as fantasies, and from which this relation is absent, tend not to be described as "interesting". The dynamic here is the same as that outlined by the literary theorist Mikhail Epstein when he writes: "It is [the] internal tension between reasonable expectation and the cognitive value of the unexpected or unexpectable that undergirds the category of the interesting ... [What] makes a certain theory interesting is its presentation of a consistent and plausible proof for what appears to be least probable. In other words, *the interest of a theory is inversely proportional to the probability of its thesis and directly proportional to the provability of its argument.*" Mikhail Epstein, "The Interesting", *Qui Parle* 18(1) (Fall/Winter, 2009), 75–88, 78–79.